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Israel's Religious Parties: Cracks in the Coalition

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An Intelligence Assessment

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Israel's Religious Parties: Cracks in the Coalition

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An Intelligence Assessment

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This assessment was prepared by [redacted]
Office of Near East-South Asia Analysis, with a
contribution from [redacted] Office of
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Israel's Religious Parties: Cracks in the Coalition

Summary

*Information available
as of 11 March 1983
was used in this report.*

Israel's main religious parties—the National Religious Party (NRP), Agudat Israel, and TAMI (Movement for a Traditional Israel)—which play a major role in the formation of ruling coalitions are becoming increasingly fragmented. Their disarray has caused speculation that this might lead to a realignment in political allegiances and a shift in Israeli politics.

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The NRP is being torn apart by defections on the right and left. Several of the party's younger, traditionally hawkish leaders are openly criticizing the party's hardline policy toward the West Bank. In a dramatic countermove, party hardliners have declared their intention of forming their own religious Zionist party.

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Agudat Israel appears to be in the midst of the most significant crisis in its history, as it is beset by unprecedented squabbling among its leaders. The party's unity is threatened by infighting over the distribution of state funds among the religious institutions supported by rival factions and the rotation of the party's parliamentary deputies.

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TAMI activists are disenchanted with the center-rightist Likud government and the party leadership over their failure to help Israel's disadvantaged Sephardi communities. TAMI was not satisfied with the coalition's handling of legislation increasing assistance to large families that was promised by Prime Minister Begin last October.

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In our judgment, the ferment within the religious community does not immediately threaten the stability of Prime Minister Begin's coalition. The most immediate impact of the religious parties' fragmentation is that it leaves the parties in a poor position to face the electorate, and they are thus likely to continue frustrating the Prime Minister's desire for early elections.

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The longer term consequences are harder to predict. The religious parties may disintegrate, with a resulting split in NRP votes between Likud and Labor. We believe it is more likely, however, that the religious parties will remain largely intact. The financial and political dividends derived from coalition membership will probably induce them to stay with their current political allies. The Labor opposition's disarray and its negligible chances of gaining and holding power in its present condition make it an unattractive ally.

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The NRP's self-examination suggests the party will be more circumspect in its support for Begin's activist policies on West Bank-Palestinian issues. We believe it will increasingly function as a pragmatic counterweight within the coalition to the annexationist tendencies of more conservative elements within the Likud and Tehiya. For now, there has not been so great a shift in the party's outlook as to cause a fundamental change in Begin's approach to the peace process in the immediate future.

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Israel's Religious Parties: Cracks in the Coalition

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The Religious Parties in Israeli Politics

Formally, Israel is a secular democratic state with no legal provision establishing Judaism as the country's dominant religion. There is, however, a close interconnection between the religious communities and the state. They assert a claim on the state's resources to support their legitimate activities.

Israel's religious parties—those identified with particular religious trends—form one of three major party groupings; the other two are the labor movement and the civil or center-rightist groupings.¹ Traditionally, the religious parties have occupied a pivotal position in Israeli politics as the only bloc of sufficient size to guarantee a viable coalition. As a result of the increasing equalization of strength between the Labor Alignment and Likud since 1973, the relative weight of the religious parties has further increased.

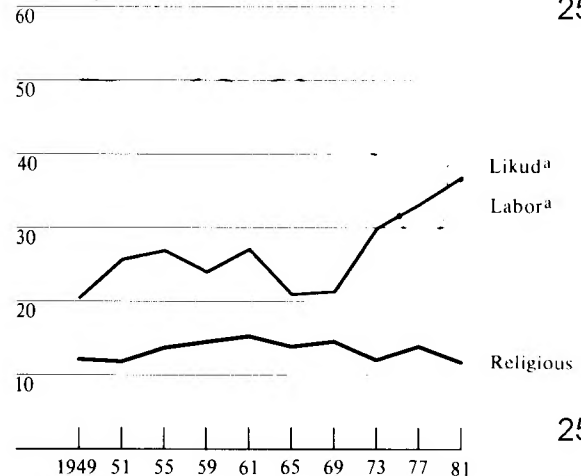
There are four religious parties: the National Religious Party (NRP), a breakaway faction from the NRP called TAMI (Hebrew acronym for Movement for a Traditional Israel), Agudat Israel (Society of Israel), and Poalei Agudat Israel (Workers of the Society of Israel). In the Knesset (parliament) elected in 1981, the NRP has six seats, TAMI has three, Agudat Israel has four, and Poalei Agudat Israel is not represented. Although the voting strength of Israel's secular parties has changed significantly since 1949, the electoral strength of religious parties as a group has remained fairly stable at 12 to 15 percent of the vote.

All the religious parties profess orthodox Judaism—conservative and reform Judaism are only insignificantly represented in Israel—though they are supported by only a part of Israel's orthodox religious

¹ The labor movement today is comprised of the parties making up the Labor Alignment—the Israel Labor Party, MAPAM (United Workers' Party), and the Citizens' Rights Movement. Among the parties included in the civil or center-rightist groupings are the Likud (Gathering Together), Shinui (Change), Independent Liberal Party, and Tehiya (Renascence).

Figure 1
Voting Trends in Knesset Elections, 1949-81

Percentage of total votes



^aTitles include parties that were at one time independent, but eventually coalesced to form the current Labor alignment and Likud combination.

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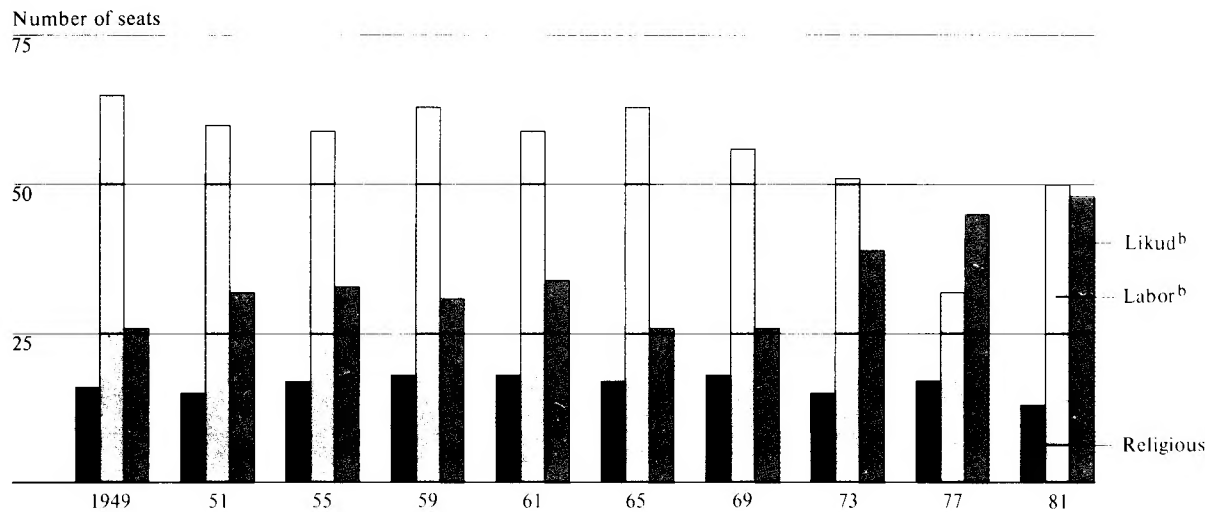
population. The precise size of Israel's orthodox population is unknown, but it is generally believed to number about one-third of the total population.

With the exception of TAMI, the religious parties are committed to a Jewish state based on orthodox Jewish law. Agudat Israel and its offshoot Poalei Agudat Israel differ from the NRP in their opposition to some aspects of Zionist ideology and in their more extreme

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Figure 2
Seats in the Knesset^a, 1949-81



^a Composed of 120 deputies.

^b Titles include parties that were at one time independent, but eventually coalesced to form the current Labor alignment and Likud combination.

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attitudes on religious matters. The Sephardi-based ² TAMI emphasizes a combination of ethnic consciousness, Jewish tradition, and Israeli nationalism. []

To promote their idea of a state based on orthodox Jewish law, the religious parties have established a comprehensive network of religious schools and used their political weight to secure state funding to strengthen them. They also have promoted legislation in the Knesset to maintain the status of orthodoxy as the only recognized form of religious Judaism and to legislate on questions of specific religious interest, such as Sabbath observance, or prevent legislation that would conflict with orthodox Jewish law. []

² The term Sephardi (plural Sephardim) applies in its strictest sense to Jews of Spanish and Portuguese origin. As used popularly and in this paper, Sephardi also includes "Oriental" Jews from North Africa and the Middle East. In its narrowest sense the term Ashkenazi (plural Ashkenazim) applies to Jews of Central and East European origin. As used in this paper, it also includes non-Sephardi Jews who have immigrated from North and South America, South Africa, and Western Europe. []

The achievements of the religious parties in these areas have been made possible by Israel's proportional representation election system. This system encourages even small political groups to try their luck at the polls and works to prevent any one party from gaining an overall majority. As a result, Israel has been ruled by a series of coalition governments since the beginning of the state. []

Nearly all past Israeli governments have found it necessary to include at least one of the religious parties—with their bloc of Knesset seats—in order to secure a working Knesset majority. Consequently, the religious parties have exercised political influence far out of proportion to their Knesset representation. []

The NRP and Agudat Israel currently hold the political balance of power between the Likud and opposition Labor Alignment and, as such, wield even

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Religious Institutional Structures in Israel

Ministry of Religious Affairs. Responsible for looking after concerns of all four recognized religious communities—Jewish, Muslim, Druze, and Christian . . . provides financial assistance toward maintenance of religious institutions and activities . . . oversees ecclesiastical courts through which each community handles questions of personal status. [redacted]

Jewish religious affairs are controlled through three interlocking structures:

Chief Rabbis and Chief Rabbinical Council. Constitute supreme Jewish religious authority for Israeli Government . . . a Sephardi and an Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi are elected by electoral college composed of rabbis, some mayors, and lay representatives of local religious councils for 10-year term . . . 10-member Rabbinical Council elected under system designed to ensure representation of both Ashkenazim and Sephardim . . . Chief Rabbis are not recognized by Agudat Israel, which accepts only religious authority of Council of Torah Sages. [redacted]

Batei Din (Ecclesiastical Courts). Distributed throughout the country, each Bet Din consists of three rabbinical judges called dayanim . . . decision of Bet Din may be appealed to Supreme Bet Din headed by two Chief Rabbis. [redacted]

Local Religious Councils. Originally instituted under British Mandate . . . act for Ministry of Religious Affairs in conjunction with local government institutions . . . members appointed jointly by Minister of Religious Affairs, local secular authority, and local rabbinate. [redacted]

more political leverage in the ruling coalition of Prime Minister Begin than in previous governments. Together they hold 10 of the 64 seats controlled by the coalition in the 120-member Knesset. Either party has the power to deprive the Likud coalition of its slim parliamentary majority. [redacted]

Some Issues Important to the Religious Parties

The Israeli Government does not control or seek to control the religious establishment of the state. Rather, the religious communities and their affiliated parties utilize state instrumentalities to further their own ends, which are not always identical. Often their divergent positions reflect political rivalries more than differing interpretations of orthodox Jewish law. In general, the political activity of the religious parties is directed at maintaining the status of orthodoxy as the only recognized form of religious Judaism. Some specific issues of concern to the religious parties are:

- Stricter public compliance with laws on Sabbath observance including a ban on all Jewish labor and public transport. 25X1
- Amending the Law of Return, which, in conjunction with other legislation, gives every Jew the right to immigrate to Israel and there acquire automatic citizenship. The religious parties want the law to stipulate that converted Jews will be granted Israeli citizenship only if converted according to orthodox procedures. This issue is referred to by most Israelis as the "Who is a Jew?" question. 25X1
- Increased state funding for religious institutions and subsidized housing for yeshiva—educational institutions mainly directed to the study of rabbinic literature—students and other observant Jews.
- Prohibition of archeological excavations at gravesites unless sanctioned by rabbinical authorities.
- Stricter enforcement of Jewish dietary laws including prohibition of the sale of pork. 25X1
- Additional exemptions from military service for all yeshiva students and women. The NRP is strongly opposed to such exemptions.
- Expansion and development of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories and extension of Israeli sovereignty to them. Agudat Israel is sharply divided on these two issues. [redacted]

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| | National Religious Party | Agudat Israel | Poalei Agudat Israel | TAMI |
|--------------------------------|--|---|--|--|
| Origin | 1956 union of two religious Zionist parties—Mizrachi and Hapoel Hamizrachi—in existence since 1902 | Founded in 1912 in Europe to unite non- and anti-Zionist orthodox elements | Agudat Israel offshoot formed in Germany and Poland in 1918 | NRP offshoot formed in 1981 by Aharon Abuhatzzeira |
| Ideology | Supports public observance of orthodox Jewish law and retention of territory west of the Jordan River | Rejects secular character of Zionism and demands public observance of orthodox Jewish law | Demands public observance of orthodox Jewish law and improvement in working conditions of Jewish workers | Committed to improvement in social welfare of Sephardi communities and maintenance of Jewish tradition in Israeli life |
| Constituency | Traditional Jews of Asian-African origin with low income and educational levels; highly educated Jews of European origin; Israeli-born youth educated in state-supported religious schools | Hasidic and ultraorthodox communities concentrated mainly in Jerusalem, Bnei Brak (near Tel Aviv), and several other municipalities; ultraorthodox yeshiva students | Ultraorthodox working-class Jews | Jews of North African origin—principally Moroccan |
| Factions | Lamifneh (Burg); Young Guard (Hammer, Ben-Meir); Gush Emunim supporters (Druckman—subfaction of Young Guard); religious agricultural settlements | Central (led by Gur Hasidim); Jerusalem (Porush); youth faction (Lorincz); Hungarian Hasidic circles (led by Belz Hasidim) | None | None |
| Knesset representation | 6 seats; 4.9 percent of vote | 4 seats; 3.7 percent of vote | 0 seats; 0.9 percent of vote | 3 seats; 2.3 percent of vote |
| Cabinet or other key positions | Ministries of Interior, Religious Affairs, Education and Culture, Foreign Affairs (deputy minister-ship); chairmanship of negotiating team on Palestinian autonomy | Chairmanship of Knesset committees on finance and labor and welfare; deputy director-generalships of Education and Religious Affairs Ministries | None | Ministries of Labor and Social Welfare and Immigrant Absorption |

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The religious parties have exercised their coalition leverage to win senior cabinet and parliamentary posts:

- The NRP controls three major portfolios—Interior, Religious Affairs, and Education and Culture—that enable it to dispense important patronage benefits and assure strong party influence over budgetary allocations to Israel's extensive religious school system.

- Yehuda Ben-Meir, a key member of the NRP's Young Guard faction, is Deputy Foreign Minister and the first NRP figure to hold a senior Foreign Ministry position.³

- TAMI controls two portfolios, Labor and Social Welfare and Immigrant Absorption Affairs.

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- NRP leader Yosef Burg is chairman of Israel's Palestinian autonomy negotiating team.

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Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Yosef Burg
of the NRP [redacted]

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Prime Minister Begin and Deputy Foreign Minis-
ter Yehuda Ben-Meir [redacted]

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- Agudat Israel holds the chairmanships of the finance and labor and welfare committees in the Knesset and the deputy director-generalships of the Ministries of Education and Religious Affairs. [redacted]

Their alliance with Begin has brought the religious parties major success in gaining government support on key issues of interest to the orthodox community. They have secured Knesset approval of restrictions on abortions, autopsies, and the participation by observant women in the military, and generous increases in government funding for religious education. [redacted]

Reaction to Events in Lebanon

The war in Lebanon and particularly the massacre of Palestinian refugees in Beirut stirred the conscience of Israel's religious community, leading many to reassess their relationship with Begin's ruling coalition. Their concern focused initially on ethical questions raised by the Army's actions and the government's hesitation to convene a commission of inquiry. [redacted]

For example, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, a respected leader in the Gush Emunim movement, called for repentance for the sin of excessive strength in his annual High Holiday lecture to students shortly after

the massacre.⁴ Although Lichtenstein refrained from openly criticizing the Begin government, he said he believed the Israeli Government and the Jewish people had subordinated Jewish values to military strength. Rabbi Yehuda Amital, cohead of one of the *yeshivot hesder*—a religious seminary combining study with military training—called in the press for the ouster of “the government of Arik Sharon.” Amital criticized what he saw as Sharon's exclusive reliance on military means to achieve peace as a strategy for endless war [redacted]

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Leaders of Israel's religious parties pressed Prime Minister Begin to investigate the massacre. According to Israeli media reports, NRP head and Minister of Interior Yosef Burg and Minister of Education and Culture Zevulun Hammer threatened to resign from the cabinet unless Begin agreed to an investigation. [redacted]

⁴ Gush Emunim—a movement committed to extensive Jewish settlement in the West Bank and the extension of Israeli sovereignty to that area—was formed in early 1974 as an organized faction within the NRP. After a short period of existence within the NRP, the Gush Emunim people left in the spring of 1974 and declared their movement an independent body. From the beginning, Gush Emunim has drawn its leadership and cadre of followers from the ranks of the NRP's youth movement. [redacted]

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The direct pressure exerted by the religious parties on Begin was reinforced by media reports of possible changes in the religious parties' political alliances. It was reported that leaders of the opposition Labor Alignment contacted NRP and TAMI Knesset members about joining forces to bring down the Likud government and form a Labor-led coalition in its stead. Burg acknowledged on television that senior opposition leaders had asked him to be prime minister of a government formed by the Alignment. Speaking to a group of *yeshivot hesder* students, Hammer said the NRP should not rule out the Alignment as a possible future coalition partner. []

TAMI Knesset members were reported in the press to be dissatisfied with the Likud government as well. In several press accounts, the public was reminded of the friendship of TAMI leader Aharon Abuhatzzeira and former Defense Minister Ezer Weizman—raising the specter of a TAMI-Weizman alliance in the event Weizman decided to return to politics. []

Rumors apparently emanating from within Agudat Israel hinted at a possible shift in its alliance with the Likud. Several leading Agudat Israel rabbis publicly criticized the "warlike" policies of the government which, in their view, caused unnecessary friction in Israel's international relations—particularly with the United States—and an increase in anti-Semitic attacks. According to the journal of the Belz Hasidim faction of the party, the Council of Torah Sages—the supreme authority of Agudat Israel—demanded that the party's Knesset members take steps to oust the Likud government.⁵ Although the official party newspaper denied that a decision had been made to abandon the coalition, at a minimum the rumors and reports suggested that elements in the party were troubled by government policies. []

Political Horse Trading

When Prime Minister Begin agreed to convene a formal commission of inquiry into the Beirut massacre in early October, the atmosphere of coalition crisis

⁵ A Hasid (plural Hasidim) is a member of a Jewish mystical movement that began in Poland in the 18th century and made a special appeal to the Jewish masses of Eastern Europe. There are a number of Hasidic sects that are identified by the locale from which they originated, such as the Belz and Gur Hasidic sects. []

appeared to subside. Burg and Hammer told Israeli television following a meeting with the Prime Minister on 11 October that they had no intention of leaving the government. []

In our judgment, although the religious parties' leaders felt morally compelled to question Israeli actions in Lebanon, they were loath to upset the ruling coalition—especially if this required holding early elections. NRP leaders have publicly acknowledged their reluctance to hold elections before the scheduled date of November 1985 because of declining electoral support. Agudat Israel leaders probably were opposed to early elections because they feared the party would split along factional lines between opponents and supporters of Begin's tough approach to Israel's security problems. TAMI leaders also feared elections would cause a split in their party. According to Israeli press reports, TAMI's leadership preferred to stay in the coalition though it was mildly critical of Begin. The party's rank and file, however, was said by the press to strongly dislike the coalition and to want to leave it in order to compel a change in party leadership. []

[] religious party leaders were also opposed to creating a precedent by bringing the opposition into power without elections, even though such a move would have been legal. [] the coalition's religious partners did not want to be "forever damned" by the electorate for having carried out a "putsch" against Begin and Sharon. []

Given their reluctance to upset the coalition, much of the political activity during the crisis reflected efforts by the religious parties to take advantage of what they saw as Begin's momentary political vulnerability to exact maximum concessions for their pet projects. Media reports suggest the religious parties were "rewarded" for their continued participation in the coalition:

- The NRP was promised more funds for *yeshivot hesder*.

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- Agudat Israel was promised government action to prohibit excavations at gravesites—unless under rabbinical sanction—and to amend the Law of Return so that Israeli citizenship would be granted to converted Jews only if they were converted according to orthodox procedures.
- TAMI was promised swift action on the passage of three social welfare laws, including increased aid to large families. [redacted]

NRP Soul Searching

The political maneuvering within the religious parties and between them and the Labor opposition obscured more significant changes taking place within the religious community, especially in the NRP. In the shadow of the Beirut massacre, several of the party's younger, traditionally hawkish leaders openly questioned many of the ultranationalist beliefs formally adopted by the party in 1973. Their concerns focused on the spiritual direction the party was taking and, more pragmatically, on the party's political future. [redacted]

Spiritual Concerns. Education and Culture Minister Hammer—who became known in the mid-1970s as a “superhawk” for strongly backing Gush Emunim's demands for Jewish settlement throughout the West Bank—altered course in late September when he suggested that the time had come for less strident nationalism and more self-scrutiny. In a televised interview, Hammer called for a change of emphasis in the NRP's political activity, whereby it would concern itself less with borders and more with being a “holy framework” for traditional Jewish life. [redacted]

Hammer subsequently has stated that he continues to regard the West Bank as Israel's by divine covenant, and he opposes Palestinian statehood. He has backed away, however, from uncritical support for unrestricted Jewish settlement in the West Bank and wants Israelis to “show respect for the Palestinians” and their rights. According to media reports, Hammer believes the application of Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza would foster trust between Israelis and Palestinians regarding their peaceful intentions and ability to coexist. [redacted]

Deputy Foreign Minister Yehuda Ben-Meir—Hammer's colleague in the NRP's Young Guard faction—strongly attacked Gush Emunim for valuing land above Jewish values after the settlement movement had publicly called for the annexation of Israeli-held portions of Lebanon. Criticizing Gush Emunim adherents for their overall hawkishness, he cited their attempt in April 1982 to disrupt the evacuation of the town of Yamit in the Sinai—required by the peace treaty with Egypt—by urging Israeli Defense Force (IDF) soldiers to disobey orders and not remove diehard settlers. In Ben-Meir's opinion, the movement is distorting its original purpose of promoting the extension of Israeli sovereignty solely to the West Bank. [redacted]

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Gush Emunim activists reacted angrily to the statements of Hammer and Ben-Meir. Following Hammer's television remarks in late September, some 25X1 accused him of sacrificing the very principles he championed in the past for political reasons because, in their view, he now wanted to replace Burg as party head. Rabbi Moshe Levinger, a leading member of the Gush Emunim secretariat, called on Hammer to resign because of his “betrayal” of the Jewish claim to the historic land of Israel. Haim Druckman, who heads an NRP faction composed of Gush Emunim adherents, accused Hammer and Ben-Meir of slandering the settlement movement and reaffirmed his opposition to territorial concessions in the West Bank. [redacted]

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Disillusionment with the hawkish ideological position of the religious community and Gush Emunim has manifested itself at the NRP's grass-roots level as well. Upon returning from army service in Lebanon, a number of *yeshivot hesder* students—who suffered a disproportionate share of casualties—publicly expressed doubts about the wisdom of the government's policies in Lebanon and the occupied territories. Together with members of the NRP's youth movement—from whose ranks come many of Gush Emunim's most ardent supporters—they have organized as leftwing lobbyists within the party. [redacted]

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Some have become involved with a new extraparlimentary group called Netivot Shalom (Paths to Peace), which expresses the need for religious Zionists to focus more on human needs and less on settlement of the occupied territories. According to the group's leaders, Netivot Shalom is opposed to Jewish settlement in densely populated areas of the West Bank and Gaza which they believe will lead to de facto annexation. They contend that Jewish morality and the question of the rights of Palestinians should take precedence over the maintenance of Jewish rule over the occupied territories and their Palestinian inhabitants [redacted]

Political Concerns. In our judgment, these developments are not entirely motivated by spiritual concerns. During the public debate on the formation of the inquiry commission, Hammer and his NRP associates could not—as a practical matter—be seen as less morally outraged than their secular counterparts in the opposition. Of greater political significance, however, is the concern of senior NRP leaders and rank and file for their party's political future as they face intraparty elections on 26 April 1983 and the possibility of national elections later in the year [redacted]

We believe the NRP leadership has determined that the party must reestablish its political identity and provide a program of action for the party's supporters. Hammer and his colleagues have acknowledged publicly that the party's militancy about the West Bank did not save it from losing four of its 10 seats in the election of June 1981. In their view the voters who defected from the NRP, most of whom belong to Gush Emunim, voted instead for Likud and Tehiya—a rightwing party favoring Israeli annexation of the occupied territories—and are most likely gone for good. The NRP probably fears it may lose even more support from devout Israelis dismayed by events in Lebanon unless it changes its ideological orientation. [redacted]

At the same time, in a move that should strengthen moderate elements within the NRP, longtime party moderate Yitzhak Raphael and his "dovish" colleague David Glass have made known their interest in rejoining the party mainstream. Raphael, who was Minister of Religious Affairs from 1974 to 1977, was

ousted from the NRP leadership by Burg and Hammer prior to the 1977 election in a move that was seen in Israel as a triumph for the NRP's hardliners. Raphael is troubled by what he sees as the NRP's deviation from its traditional religious mission and its pursuit of what he regards as extremist political goals in the West Bank. He holds both Burg and Hammer responsible for what he terms the "decline of the NRP" and has stated publicly that the party's salvation depends on its returning religious Zionist issues to the forefront of a more moderate political platform. He claims his planned return to political life is to bring about these ideological goals and not to secure a position in the party leadership or in the government. [redacted]

Raphael's return to the political fray is likely to intensify the leadership struggle within the NRP as it prepares for internal elections in April. Although Burg is acknowledged as party head, most observers concede that Hammer exercises more control because his faction dominates the party's decisionmaking apparatus. Raphael is demanding, however, that the party be led by someone other than Hammer or Burg who is not associated with the party's electoral and ideological decline. [redacted]

In order to shore up his position in the party in light of his criticism of party hardliners, Hammer has reached an agreement with Burg to join forces in the coming elections against would-be opponents, according to media reports. Hammer probably will attempt a reconciliation with Raphael as well. Raphael's cooperation, however, will not be easily won. Raphael has bitter memories of the political maneuvering by Hammer and Burg that eased him out of the party's leadership six years ago. Nevertheless, for the sake of party unity and survival, Hammer, Burg, and Raphael may find it possible to form a joint leadership. [redacted]

Burg appears to be aligning with the moderate consensus now developing within the party. Burg, who heads the government's negotiating team on Palestinian autonomy, told students at Bar-Ilan University

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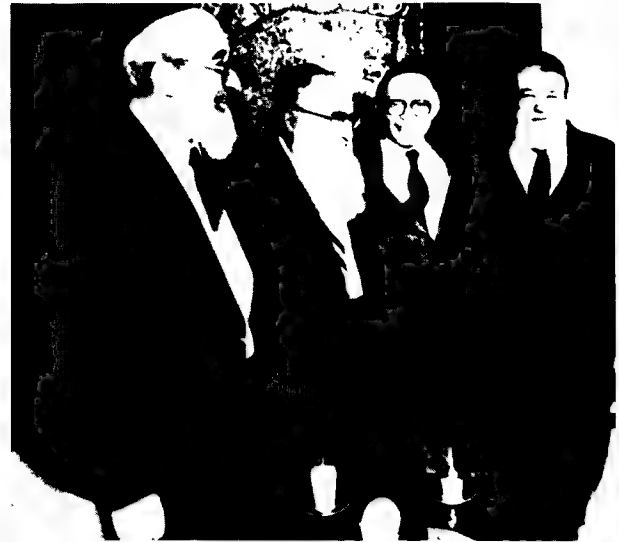
recently that, in his view, it was no calamity to seek compromise with the Arabs. This is in sharp contrast to a comment he made shortly after the election of June 1981 that Israel would make no more concessions on Palestinian autonomy. In his remarks at Bar-Ilan, Burg even claimed that back in 1967 he warned against the danger of "messianic ideas" as the basis for political action—a veiled reference to the forerunners of Gush Emunim. [REDACTED]

Political Repercussions. The emergence of more moderate voices within the NRP suggests the party is moving toward acknowledging that territorial concessions on the West Bank are possible. Although Hammer and Ben-Meir currently reject this notion, they already have come far in acknowledging that the concept of the Land of Israel is not a hallowed Jewish value in itself. [REDACTED]

In any event, these developments have caused a dramatic split with Gush Emunim. NRP faction leader Haim Druckman has announced he is leaving the party with his Gush Emunim supporters and other hardliners to form an independent religious Zionist party. The new party MATZAD (Hebrew acronym for Religious Zionist Camp) has adopted Gush Emunim's slogan of "The people of Israel, on the land of Israel, based on the Torah of Israel" and has attracted support from important elements within the NRP. Although Druckman's move is in part a reaction to Hammer's and Ben-Meir's public reassessments, it also is intended to offer party hardliners a compatible ideological alternative to Likud and Tehiya within a national religious party. [REDACTED]

In the longer term, the NRP's movement to the center of the political spectrum raises the possibility of a renewed coalition partnership with Labor. In late January Labor Party Chairman Shimon Peres spoke to an NRP audience for the first time since the NRP and Likud joined forces in 1977. Peres spoke on the ideological roots of the historical alliance between Labor and the NRP. [REDACTED]

The Likud leadership apparently is concerned by the prospect of an NRP-Labor alliance. According to Israeli media reports, Prime Minister Begin personally asked Ben-Meir whether the party's ties with the



Prime Minister Begin and leaders of the Agudat Israel Party [REDACTED]

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Likud would be weakened by—among other developments—Raphael's political comeback. Nevertheless, we do not believe the NRP is ready to leave the coalition. [REDACTED]

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Crisis in Agudat Israel

Israeli media reports suggest the number of Agudat Israel supporters who privately have misgivings about the policies of the Likud coalition is growing. They are not likely to disturb the coalition, however, so long as the party continues to benefit by its participation in the government. Nevertheless, we believe Agudat Israel would not be opposed to joining an Alignment-led coalition if the balance of power in the Knesset should change. Its decision would be made by the Council of Torah Sages on pragmatic grounds. [REDACTED]

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In our judgment, Agudat Israel's partnership with the Likud is more likely to be undermined by internal factionalization. The party's unity is threatened by infighting between groups representing the Belz Hasidim and the Gur Hasidim.⁶ The contentious issues

⁶ The Gur Hasidim lead the party's "Central" faction representing mainly the old-guard Agudat Israel of pre World War II Poland. This faction became central in Agudat Israel in the 1940s when some of its leaders immigrated to Israel. The Belz Hasidim—also originally from Poland—dominate a faction consisting of Hungarian Hasidic and yeshiva circles, centered mainly in Bnei Brak (near Tel Aviv). [REDACTED]

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appear to relate only in part to the party's relationship with the coalition. The Belz faction is generally seen as more moderate on national and Zionist issues—opposing the government's settlement policies, for example—and weaker in its loyalty to Prime Minister Begin than the Gur faction. []

The more critical issues concern the distribution of state funds among the religious institutions supported by each of the rival factions and the principle of rotating the party's Knesset representation among the factions. According to press reports, the Gur Hasidim want to dislodge the two veteran Knesset deputies Shlomo Lorincz and Menahem Porush because they are associated with the Belz group. Lorincz and Porush probably will not give up their seats without a struggle, however, and the party's formal unity would be threatened as a result. []

Rotating the party's Knesset members would also affect the seat held by Avraham Shapira, chairman of the Likud coalition executive committee, who is a close confidant of Begin and a power broker between parties on both sides of the Knesset aisle. According to the US Embassy, Shapira has agreed to give up his seat, if asked to do so. Since none of his colleagues in Agudat Israel can match his political clout or is as close to the Prime Minister, Shapira's absence from the Knesset and coalition committee would be keenly felt. According to the US Embassy, Agudat Israel supporters are striving to keep the factions together, fearing that a total break will scatter followers to other parties. []

TAMI Unrest

There is also considerable unrest inside the Sephardi-based TAMI party. Media reports indicate that the party's rank and file is disenchanted with the coalition because it perceives a widening economic gap between Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews in Israel. TAMI activists evidently are disillusioned with their leadership as a result of the party's failure to improve the lot of Israel's disadvantaged Sephardi communities. []

According to reports in the press, TAMI's disenchantment has been fueled by the government's handling of the three social welfare laws that Begin committed himself to promote last October in return for TAMI's

continued support. Although the government supported passage of the measure to increase aid to large families, it did not include funds for this purpose in the budget. Only after TAMI threatened to bolt the coalition did the Finance Ministry decide to ask the Knesset to approve a special tax on Israelis traveling abroad in order to raise the necessary funds. []

TAMI's problem, however, is that its leverage within the coalition is more limited than that of the other religious parties. Although we believe the Prime Minister would like to retain TAMI's loyalty, TAMI alone cannot threaten the coalition. Moreover, the interests of the Sephardi community can be served best by TAMI's continued participation in the government. []

Outlook

In our judgment, the ferment within the religious community does not pose an immediate threat to the stability of Prime Minister Begin's coalition. The most immediate impact of the parties' fragmentation has been to frustrate Begin's desire for early elections. According to the US Embassy, the religious parties fear that elections could reveal the extent to which they are divided and end their existence as a coherent political force. We believe the NRP, following publication of the report of the board of inquiry on the Beirut massacre, did not insist on Sharon's removal from the cabinet in part because it feared Begin would have required its agreement to new elections in exchange. []

With the exception of TAMI, we believe the basic structure of the religious parties and their partnership with Begin's Likud are likely to remain largely intact. However dissatisfied they may be with the government's policies, they will continue to see more political and financial benefit in remaining with Likud than in risking an excursion into the political wilderness. This will be particularly true as long as Begin retains his commanding position in Israeli political life and as long as the Labor opposition is in disarray and has no foreseeable hope of securing and retaining power. []

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The religious parties will encounter a number of other constraints on their willingness to defect from Begin's government. They are generally uncomfortable with the antireligious attitude prevalent in the Labor Party. Despite the growing moderation of many in the religious community, there remains a wide gap between their positions on key foreign policy issues and the "dovish" inclinations of many in Labor. Finally, the religious parties tend to be repelled by Labor's own internal problems and leadership struggle. []

If the parties do disintegrate, Likud is likely to benefit most. If the NRP were to break up, Likud would undoubtedly pick up voters, although Labor would also benefit if leftwing NRP supporters ally with it. A split in Agudat Israel—though not imminent—would favor Likud, as party remnants would have greater difficulty voting for and participating in Labor. TAMI's future is the most doubtful, given its perceived failure to have an impact on government policy. Its disintegration will be helped if Raphael's comeback in the NRP is successful. Several supporters of his old faction, who were among TAMI's founders in 1981, already have rejoined Raphael, and more are expected to do so. []

Implications for the Peace Process

In the past, Prime Minister Begin counted on the support of the religious parties for his hardline policies on West Bank–Palestinian issues. The key role they played in keeping Begin in power not only reinforced his desire to pursue such policies but made it prudent coalition politics. Spurred on especially by the NRP, the Begin government has endeavored to increase the number of Jewish settlers in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem. It also has stepped up efforts to complete the roads, electric power grids, and waterlines linking Jewish settlements with each other and Israel proper. []

The NRP's self-examination suggests the party will be more circumspect in its support for aggressive policies on West Bank–Palestinian issues. Although the full extent of the party's ideological reorientation is not yet clear, we believe it will increasingly function as a pragmatic counterweight within the coalition to the annexationist tendencies of more conservative elements within Likud and Tehiya. []

For now, there has not been so great a shift in the NRP's outlook as to cause a fundamental change in Begin's approach to the peace process in the immediate future. Begin insists that negotiations on the West Bank be conducted solely on the basis of the Camp David accords. Otherwise, he fears the outcome of negotiations would be the detachment of the West Bank from Israel and the creation of an independent Palestinian state. The NRP largely shares this view, and Begin can count on its strong support. []

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Appendix A

Evolution of Israel's
Religious Parties

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The NRP was created in 1956 by a merger of the two religious parties in the Zionist movement which had been in existence since the beginning of the century, Mizrahi (Easterner) and its socialist-oriented offshoot Hapoel Hamizrachi (Eastern Worker). Agudat Israel came into existence in 1912 as a reaction by orthodox Jews against the secularization of Jewish life by the Zionists. Its opposition was specifically directed at Mizrahi, which had been founded 10 years earlier. []

Much of Agudat Israel's support came from the rabidly anti-Zionist Hasidic oligarchy of Eastern Europe, who rejected Zionism because of its irreligious leadership and its presumption in returning the Jews to their ancient homeland before the advent of the Messiah. Those Agudat Israel followers who went to settle in Palestine did so because it was a religious obligation, and, once there, they separated themselves from the Zionist pioneers and objected to the revival of colloquial Hebrew as a profanation of the holy tongue. With the rise of Nazism and the realization that Palestine offered a refuge to the Jews, Agudat Israel began to support the Zionists' claim to statehood. As a result, practical cooperation with the Zionist authorities replaced the old animosities. []

When the State of Israel was formed, the Mizrahi parties joined forces with the two Agudat Israel groups to form a single electoral list for the first elections in 1949 and joined the first coalition government as the United Religious Front. Soon afterward, however, the Agudat Israel parties left the United Religious Front and the government. Successive attempts to unite all of the religious parties into a common bloc have been unsuccessful. []

The union of Mizrahi and Hapoel Hamizrachi as the National Religious Party has been more successful. In 1981 a scandal surrounding NRP Minister of Religious Affairs Aharon Abuhatzaira resulted in an open

split. Abuhatzaira, accused of misuse of funds while Minister of Religious Affairs, was tried and acquitted. He charged that his opponents in the party had instigated the whole business and broke away from the NRP to establish his own party—TAMI—which was essentially a communal list designed to appeal to North African Jews. (Abuhatzaira comes from a noted Moroccan rabbinical family.) []

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The two ultraorthodox parties, Agudat Israel and Poalei Agudat Israel, have periodically joined forces as the Torah Religious Front. They ran a combined party list in the seventh and eighth Knessets (1969 and 1973) only to break apart in the ninth Knesset (1977). []

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The NRP has served as a member of every government since 1949 with the exception of two brief periods. The participation of Agudat Israel and Poalei Agudat Israel in the government has been more erratic. Both were members of the ruling coalition from 1949 to 1952. Subsequently, Agudat Israel abandoned active participation in the government and merely negotiated a modus vivendi with Labor giving it control over its own school and rabbinical court systems and other areas of religious concern. After the 1977 election, it agreed to support the Begin coalition although it did not take seats in the cabinet. Poalei Agudat Israel, which did not join forces with Begin's Likud government, was a member of the government from 1961 to 1969. []

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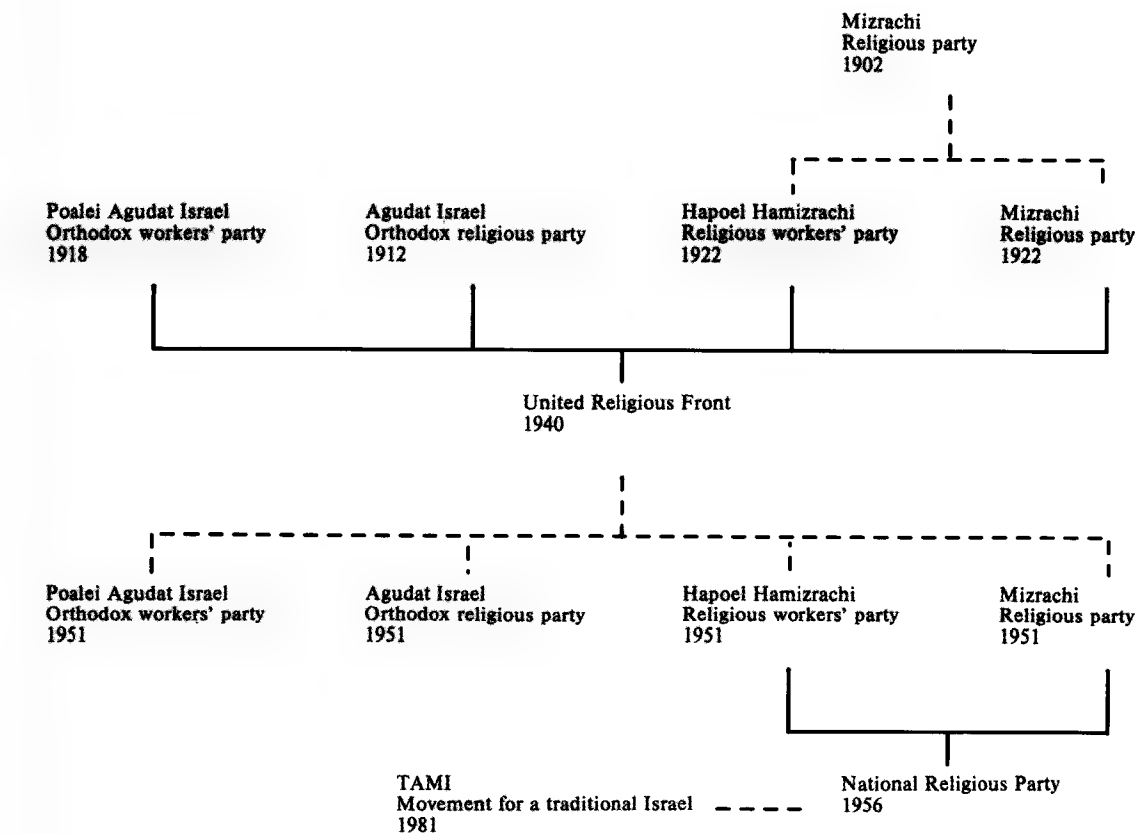
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Figure 3
Evolution of Israel's Religious Parties



----- Split
 ————— Merger

Note: Israeli independence 1948

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Appendix B

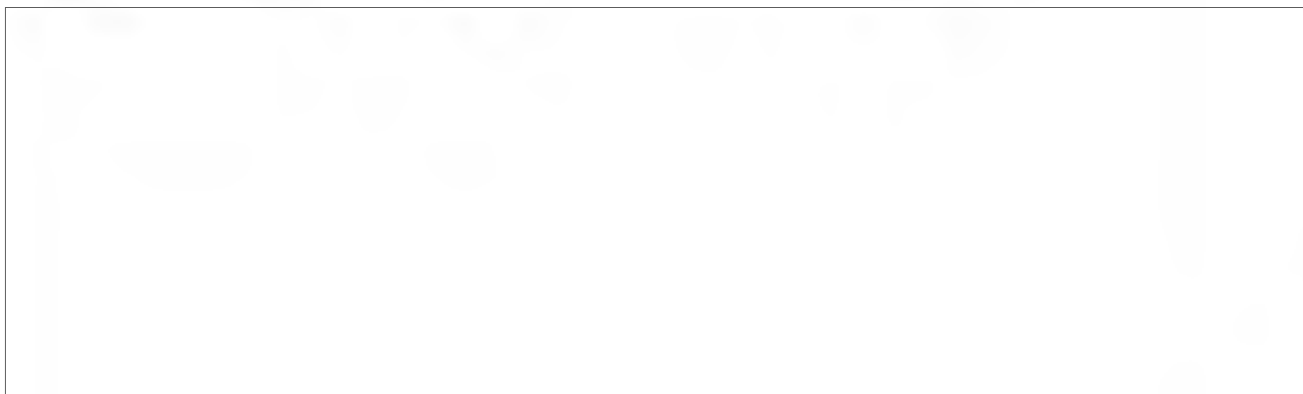
Israeli Religious Party Leaders



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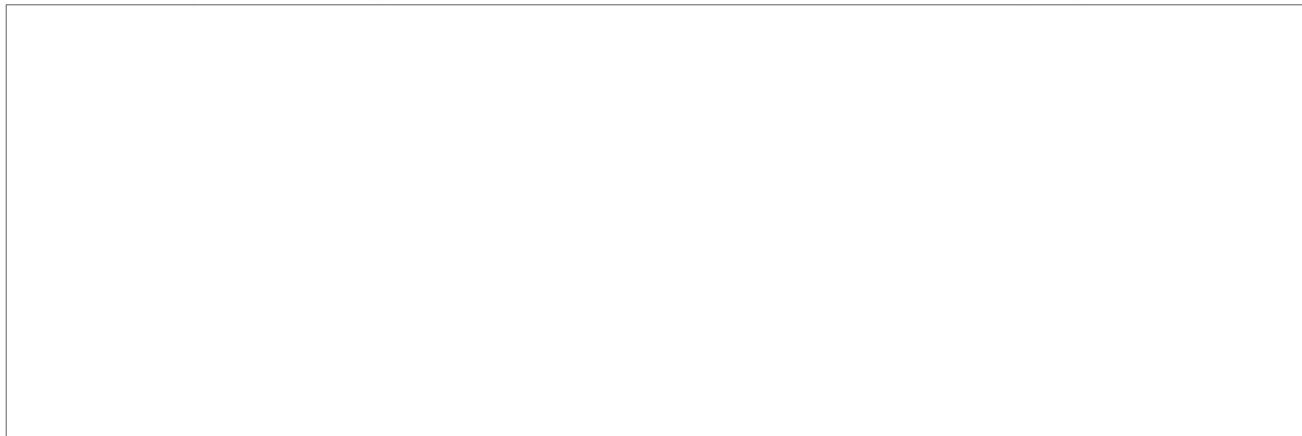
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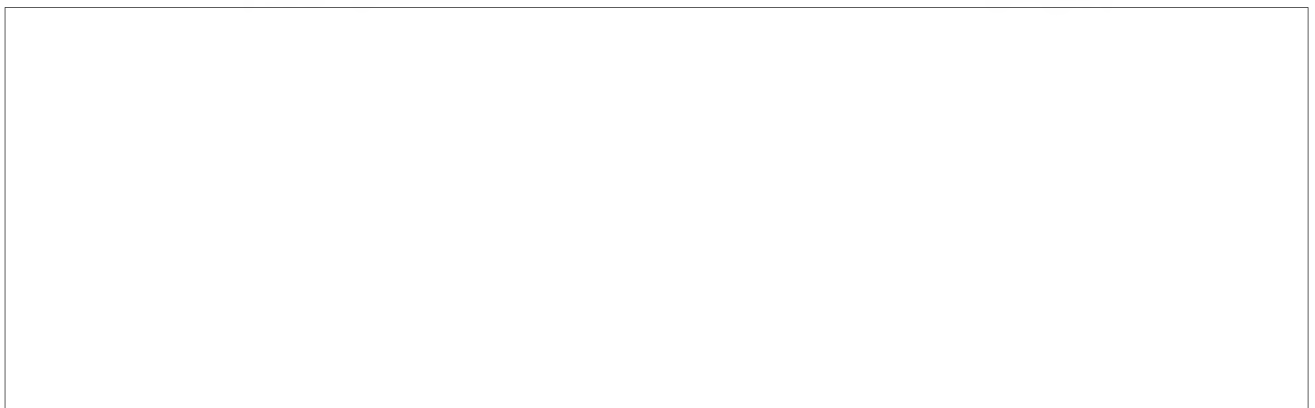
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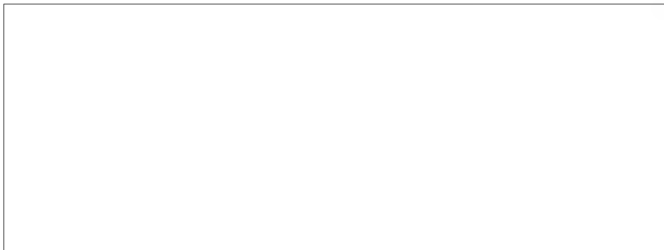
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